

**NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN A COLD CLIMATE:  
THE CASE OF SCOTLAND<sup>1</sup>**

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In this paper I will explore the assumption that Scotland is the exception to the rule linking culture and nationalism, and in particular, that it is something of a deviant case. I will also take issue with the conventional wisdom that national identity and economic development are unconnected, except that the value of arts and culture lies in their economic pay-off, narrowly defined. Finally, I will examine cultural politics in Scotland since Home Rule in 1999.

**Culture and the Nation**

At the risk of oversimplifying, the conventional wisdom might be taken as follows: that distinctive national culture drives national identity, and that together they drive politics such that ‘a people’ express that national identity in the quest for self-government (McCrone, 2001). The sharpest account is that of the Czech sociologist Miroslav Hroch (1985) who argued that nationalist movements follow three phases: the first, in which small-scale scholarly enquiry uncovers the cultural basis of the nation, collecting linguistic, folkloric and historic fragments and assembling them into a mosaic of national culture; the second, in which a wider range of activists are drawn into the campaign to ‘awaken’ the nation from its slumbers; and the final phase

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whereby a mass movement pursues political self-determination as the means of expressing this unique national identity. I imagine that Hroch's account of cultural nationalism, mobilisation, and mass politics will resonate with Irish listeners, not because it describes precisely what happened in the movement to Irish independence, but because it has become a familiar account, *ex post facto*, of the process. In the history of nationalism in these islands, it seems the 'truest' account, involving a struggle for national liberation based on a historic mobilisation of distinct cultural markers – religion, language, ethnicity – to the point at which independence can come to seem 'inevitable' well after the event. Nationalism on the big island across the water is less clear-cut. England is the elephant in the room; the nationalism that dares not speak its name. Wales, to be sure, has linguistic distinctiveness at least on a par with Ireland (around 20% claim to speak or understand Welsh), but a political nationalism weaker than its Scottish counterpart. That this seems so is intellectually curious, for the conventional wisdom tends more to Benedict Anderson's view that Scotland was not culturally distinctive enough from England to survive as a separate self-governing nation after 1707 (1996:90). Thus, it was a vigorously Protestant country, albeit of a more fundamentalist strain than the English; its lowlands were English-speaking; and after the failure of the '45 Jacobite Rising, in which they played a neutral-to-oppositional part, sufficiently 'unionist' to acquiesce, and even prosper, in the British state and empire.

The conventional wisdom about the Scots is that their lack of cultural distinctiveness from the English meant that the demand for outright self-government was weak. Maybe if Scotland had been Catholic, or Gaelic-speaking, or non-white, for example, the story might have been different. It is important, of course, to bear in mind that the

1707 Union gave the Scots considerable self-government, notably control over law, religion, money, local government, and a myriad of boards which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were consolidated into the Scottish Office; a self-governing entity without direct political control. Whatever Scotland was, however, it was emphatically not a colony of England, but what Tom Nairn called a junior partner in British imperialism. The fact that it took almost the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for direct democratic accountability to occur in the recovery of a home rule parliament in 1999 gave rise to an influential strain of writing about the relationship between culture and politics. This was often depicted as a failure of will, of deep and abiding socio-psychological barriers to self-government (see Nairn's influential *The Break-Up of Britain*, 1977). Here is a flavour of that argument, updated twenty five years later: 'If there is one thing that the Scots in particular know all about, it is self-colonisation. They lived it for three hundred years after the treaty of Union in 1707'.

Nairn warns to his theme:

The sententious moralism of the marginalised; disregard of democratic deficit for economic opportunity; cultural over-compensation and romantic chest-beating, to efface or embellish powerlessness; over-effusive loyalty to a distant cause and metropolis, welcomed and yet somehow never welcome enough – all these tropes of a supposedly post-national worlds are, alas, tired old family skeletons in Edinburgh and Glasgow (Nairn, 2003: 26)

Others, including me, take issue with this overly culturalist and socio-psychological explanation for the lack of self-government (McCrone, 2001; Paterson, 1994), on the grounds that it is an over-elaborate and under-evidenced account demanding the use of Occam's razor. Put simply, the alternative view is that Scotland actually had considerable self-government within the British state and empire for swathes of its

population to prosper. ‘Scots on the make’ was the cry from the south, both in terms of economic and political opportunities. This was an unlikely cry if Scots had been a classically oppressed people. The Union and Empire gave Scots greater opportunities than they would otherwise have had as a small, poor state on the fringes of North-West Europe, as well as safeguarding institutional autonomy and (lower-case) self-government. Only in the final quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did the movement for greater self-government emerge, on the back of North Sea oil, greater political control from the British centre, and a significant divergence in electoral behaviour north and south of the border. Thatcher, and Thatcherism, became the midwife of Scottish home rule. Nevertheless, the pathological reading of Scottish culture and politics was too attractive for some to give it up. In 2003, a book by Carl Craig called, revealingly, *The Scots’ Crisis of Confidence*, attracted much media attention, as well as money from the Labour/LibDem Scottish government/executive of the day, to cure us of our alleged debilitating psychological habits. The argument, of course, was baleful and self-propagating. It will be familiar to the Irish too (at least to older people), for Ireland too allegedly suffered from a dominant trope of personal repression and backwardness until it was replaced by its opposite – success and self-confidence, the so-called Celtic tiger. Elsewhere, I have commented that: ‘This approach is sometimes reinforced by a sub-genre of émigré writing which depicts the homeland either as an idyllic *tir-nan-óg*, or (sometimes as well as) a culturally barren, benighted landscape.’ (McCrone, BJS, 2005: 72).

The point I am making here is that such culturalist accounts for (the lack of) political and economic development have powerful appeal despite (or perhaps because of) their lack of systematic and rigorous evidence to back them. They are predispositions

of considerable cultural power which set the frame for economic and political agendas. They may be wrong, in sociological terms, but they are powerfully wrong in setting the frame for debate. We might take the view that hard-headed bureaucrats and those in charge of development budgets have little truck with such culturalist preconceptions. Our research suggests this is wide of the mark. In research on economic agencies as part of our Leverhulme funded programme on national identity and constitutional change, we discovered that nationalism and national identity played an important part in the work of economic agencies (Bond et al., 2003). In other words, such agencies use national identity as a form of economic promotion. We identified four narratives: the first, we called '*reiteration*', the capacity to emphasise national qualities and traditions. '**This** is who we are', for example, a people who value education and innovation. The second was '*recapture*', where past successes (e.g. 19<sup>th</sup> century entrepreneurship) are a resource for solving current problems: 'we can be that again'. The third was '*reinterpretation*', whereby historically 'negative' features such as language or under-development are rebranded as contemporary advantages: 'This is what it really means to be us'. Finally, there is '*repudiation*' – 'we are no longer **those** people' – giving up an old industrial legacy and its *mentalité*.

The point of these narratives is not that they are histories – they don't have unalloyed truth status - so much as accounts propagated in the quest for economic development. What is important is that they are a key cultural resource. They make the point that there is no clear dividing line between 'culture' and 'economics', between what we might call emotionality and rationality. My research colleagues, Steve Reicher and Nick Hopkins, who are social psychologists to trade, have observed that the conventional wisdom is that people, by and large, are driven by rational self-interest,

by profit-and-loss accounting. In other words, the pursuit is less of happiness as of economic self-interest (it's the economy, stupid). They argue that this is why we get debates about 'culture' and the arts in terms of their economic potential, in terms of the supposed value-added, the pay-off in jobs etc. I'm always somewhat amazed (and sceptical) of the claims that an investment of £y in the arts generates £y+. There is more than a touch of the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy in that; you will recall that the computer was asked to answer the question: what is the meaning of life, and replied, '42'. When asked what kind of damn-fool answer that was, it retorted that it was a damn-fool question to ask in the first place. The conventional wisdom has been that hard economic self-interest allegedly predominates in social affairs, and that other things like culture, identity, arts, even politics are soft and derivative. Except that the current economic crisis seems to have undermined that. In the cold light of 2009 it doesn't seem to be that way any more. We are told of 'animal instincts' driving markets; that the rational and the emotional are not opposites. Reicher and Hopkins comment in our forthcoming book (Bechhofer and McCrone, 2009):

'Without both knowing and feeling, we would either have an idea where we are but no idea where we want to go, or else a sense of where we want to end up but no sense of how to get there. In either case, we couldn't behave in a meaningful way'.

There is nothing quite like a crisis to undermine conventional truths. The collapse of the god of the market reveals what was always ideological; that supposed truths were no longer self-evident, or at least built somewhat on sand. Hegemony of ideas depends on the taken-for-granted, what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) called *habitus*, a powerful form of cultural capital which habituates behaviour and

assumptions as givens, until they are shown to be just that, assumptions. You will recall the comment by Humpty Dumpty in Alice in Wonderland:

“When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more or less.”

“The question is”, said Alice, “whether you can make words means so many different things.”

“The question is”, said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.”

What I am saying is that we adopt cultural assumptions as givens, even where these do not seem ‘cultural’ at all. The ‘fact’ of the free market, if you like, is in essence a cultural belief. We operate within them as if they are ‘facts’, and with them come stereotypes, which fall apart when circumstances change: that Scots make great bankers; that the Irish are Celtic tigers, and so on. It is always difficult to be sceptical of words which we take to be masters – that’s all. We have of course known at least since the time of Max Weber one hundred years ago that ‘rationality’ itself is a powerful ideology, that we reify it as a fact of social and economic life, until such time as we are forced to revise and adopt a new strategem of rationality.

Much of this argument rests on what we mean by terms such as ‘economy’ and ‘culture’ anyway. The conventional wisdom, for example, would be to see the economy simply as a way to describe something that already existed, because all societies make things and market them, and buy and sell goods. However, as Timothy Mitchell points out, the idea of the economy belongs to the era of nation-states, in which ‘human sociality is understood as a series of equivalent national units’ (Mitchell, 2008: 450). Further, the creation of the economy as a socio-technical project was in part the handiwork of economists whose ‘contribution was to help devise the forms of calculation in terms of which new kinds of socio-technical practice were organized, to monitor these forms of practice as though they formed a

self-regulating system, and to put forward rival accounts of how the system worked' (op. cit: 451). Further, 'the more work that was done to make the economy appear as a distinct object to be measured and managed, the more readily culture could appear as its own realm of government and expertise' (op. cit: 463). In other words, de-objectifying both economy and culture makes it more likely that we understand how they interact.

For its part, culture, like economy or society or polity, is not a distinct and relatively closed part of social life. It is defined less by its content than by its form: less 'what' than 'how'. Thus, culture refers to the domain of symbols relating to social practices, rather than their objectification. Donald Dewar, Scotland's First Minister in 1999, captured the essence in his opening speech when he spoke of 'who we are, and how we carry ourselves'. In a more academic vein, Peter Worsley (1984: 249) once pointed out that cultural traits 'are not absolutes or simple intellectual categories, but are invoked to provide identities which legitimise claims to rights. They are strategies or weapons in competitions over scarce goods'. Both are correct. Both de-essentialise culture, and treat it as a narrative or a rhetoric with which we give an account of ourselves and others. They get us away from the notion that cultures are discrete and different, one from the other, and that out of these units spring nations, economies, societies.

### **Culture in Contemporary Scotland**

What sense, then, can we make out of the relationship between culture, economy and politics in contemporary Scotland? It's an interesting time to talk about that because we are coming up to the tenth anniversary of the Scottish parliament, so we have ten

years of evidence on which to base our thoughts. Not only that, but since May 2007 there has been a minority nationalist government in power at Holyrood, so we have a comparison not only between pre-and post-devolution Scotland, but between unionist and nationalist governments. For unionists in particular, it seems a tricky situation, because, as the journalist Douglas Fraser pointed out, ‘perhaps it was because the arts and culture is where Scottish identity has its foundations, and that was seen as Nationalist territory best avoided’ (The Herald, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2007). That may seem to be a straightforward enough statement, but we know from research on national identity that there is only a loose connection between how people in Scotland think of themselves in national identity terms, and how they do their politics. Thus, about half of SNP supporters define themselves as Scottish not British, what we might call ‘exclusive Scots’, and turning it round, just over a quarter of exclusive Scots support the Nationalists, and, at least in 2006, marginally more support Labour. Similarly, those who say they are mainly or exclusively British (it’s only 1 in 10 these days) are not dyed-in-the-wool unionists who believe that a Scottish parliament is the road to perdition. In other words, the relationship between ‘politics’, either in terms of which political party you support, or your preferred constitutional option, on the one hand, and how you construe your national identity on the other, is attenuated. The conventional wisdom is that Scotland is unusual, that it has weak cultural markers, and that its complex relationship within and to the British state makes it exceptional in these regards. Actually, that doesn’t seem to be so, because when you look at Wales or Catalonia or Quebec, other under-stated nations, you discover much the same thing, or, in the case of Wales where language is actually stronger, a weaker relationship between national identity and politics. At the same time, if you ask Scots whether they think of themselves in ‘political’ or ‘cultural’ terms, they opt for the

latter, just to reinforce the point<sup>2</sup>. Neither has having a parliament made people feel more Scottish, in large part because at the start of the process in the late 1990s, the vast majority – two-thirds - put themselves at the Scottish end of the Scottish-British continuum anyway, and there is something of a ceiling effect. In short, Scots are Scottish first, and British second, and while most – over half – are content to say they are British to some degree, their national – Scottish- identity far outweighs their state – British – one.

### **The Politics of Cultural Policy**

If Scots' sense of themselves is strongly Scottish, as well as mainly cultural, how has the new parliament handled that? The first thing to notice is that there have been almost as many government ministers for arts and culture as there have been years of the parliament. Most have come and gone – nine in all, on a liberal count. In the first few years, they had deputy minister status, and combined with other briefs, notably sport and tourism, and since 2003, ministerial status. The longest serving, Patricia Ferguson, did 3 years. Since the change of government in 2007, when the incoming Nationalists decided on fewer and larger ministries, there has been a minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani) and when she lost her job in 2009, a minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution (Michael Russell). Incidentally, when Mike Russell took up his portfolio, he quoted Charlie Haughey,

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<sup>2</sup> We asked: 'Some people say that being Scottish is mainly about Scotland's landscape, and music, Scottish sporting teams, Scottish language and literature and so on. Others say that being Scottish is mainly about, for example, the way Scotland is governed, the Scottish parliament and how Scotland runs its affairs.' On a scale of 1 (cultural) to 7 (political), the median score is 3, with 31% on points 1 or 2, and 5% on 6 or 7, in other words, a ratio of 6:1 in favour of the 'cultural' meaning of being Scottish. (source: Scottish Social Attitudes, 2006)

that the real purpose of living was finding the importance of things beyond ourselves in the happiest and most creative way.

One would be hard pushed to find real difference in the policies and even the rhetoric towards the arts between the unionist government before 2007, and the nationalist one thereafter, apart from the usual genuflections towards the union on the one hand, and how much better things would be in an independent Scotland, on the other. This partly reflects the fact that arts and culture are not politicised in Scotland, that the nationalists come out of a strong ‘civic’ (political) rather than an ‘ethnic’ (cultural) background, and above all, that they are faced with similar tricky problems. All are agreed on the income-generating function of arts and culture, and putting tourist bums on seats. It was the Labour/LibDem government which set up the Cultural Commission, chaired by James Boyle, broadcaster and ex-chairman of the Scottish Arts Council (SAC), and which reported in 2005. This helped bring about the successful National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) which managed to avoid regional rivalries within Scotland by setting itself up as a virtual theatre, and not one in competition with local arts organisations. It was helped by having a young, dynamic Englishwoman in charge, whose early hit was ‘Black Watch’, a play about Scottish soldiers (in the British army) in Iraq, which played to packed houses. If that was the helpful legacy from the unionist government, its baleful legacy was Creative Scotland, a forced marriage between the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, which brought down one minister, Fabiani, after the proposal was defeated in parliament in late 2008. You pays your money and takes your choice as regards explanations for this ongoing debacle, be it the potential of direct ministerial interference in the arts which raised artistic hackles, the marriage of strange

bedfellows, cack-handed political incompetence in getting legislation through a parliament where the government is a minority, the bureaucratic legacy embedded in SAC, or the fact that Scottish Enterprise holds most of the purse-strings. Still, the bill is not dead, but like the Monty Python parrot, merely resting. It lives to fight another day, this time with a new master/minister. What is slightly chilling is that at one point the chair of the joint board, a retired bishop no less, exclaimed: “the idea of creativity must include the whole of humanity!” (The Herald, 9<sup>th</sup> May 2008) – a chilling thought, because it feels at times that they’re all being consulted.

Behind it all lies the issue of what arts and culture are for in Scotland, and the assumption that it’s about income-generation and tourism rather than developing the national soul. After all, we have learned to look across the North Channel to Ireland where you have, belatedly, become our benchmark in these matters. This is interesting in itself, because only in the last twenty years have we looked west rather than east (to Scandinavia) to emulate Ireland’s development. Whether that will continue remains to be seen, given the serious economic downturn. Two recent developments prove the point that imitation is the most sincere form of flattery. About a decade ago, Scottish governments invented Tartan Day (oddly midwived in 1997 by some right-wing Republican politicians in the USA) as a clear take-off of St Patrick’s Day, and a device for liberating American investment money. To date, it’s hard to quantify that, apart from the curious and conflictual proposal by Donald Trump to build yet another golf course in Scotland, this time in Aberdeenshire, in memory of his mother who came from Lewis, which, if your geography is even half-decent, is on the wrong side of the country, and a long way away from the east coast, even as the proverbial crow flies across the Grampian mountains. This process of

chasing the dollar is also to the fore in ‘Homecoming 2009’, a year-long event designed to attract Scots abroad to the motherland, except that it too is focused on the USA, rather than on Canada, New Zealand and Australia where most Scots settled. It is curious too because by and large, and unlike the Irish, Scots quickly went native when they emigrated, and did not stay in large communities, preferring, because they were more skilled and affluent to take their chances as sturdy individualists. Apart from annual shindigs at Burns Suppers and St Andrew’s Night ceilidhs, to say nothing of ersatz Highland Games, Scots were pretty well invisible and went native except when it suited them, which wasn’t very often.

National Tartan Day, in case you have not noticed, is April 6<sup>th</sup>, under U.S. Senate Resolution 155, allegedly being the date of the signing of the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320, which, says the website “asserted Scotland’s sovereignty over English territorial claims and which was an influence on the American Declaration of Independence” (<http://www.tartanday.org>). So far, so dubious. The idea was borrowed from Canada which had instigated a national tartan day in 1993. The website goes on:

Around the country [the USA, that is] a true grass-roots effort took place. Thousands of Scots-Americans found ways to observe the first Tartan Day in churches, on village greens, at Scottish festivals, at social gatherings, and in the home. It would seem that at last the Scots in America had found a cause around which all could rally. Tartan Day was observed on April 6, 1997, for the first time in US history. And it is a day that will be observed so long as there are Scots who care about their heritage.

What is interesting is that this is entirely a ‘for export only’ affair. Natives would look blankly if you told them on 6<sup>th</sup> April that this was Tartan Day; more like the start of a new tax year, they might say. In truth, it owes far more to the quest by Americans for roots, and the allowances made in the census form to indicate your ‘ethnic’ origin as well as your citizenship. Thus, ‘Today, over eleven million Americans claim Scottish or Scotch-Irish roots – making them the eighth largest ethnic group in the United States’. It is also a reflection of the success of the Irish in the States, but at least 17<sup>th</sup> March has meaning back home.

If National Tartan Day is an American affair, then Homecoming is the creature of the Scottish tourist industry, supported by the Scottish Tourist Board, or ‘VisitScotland’ as it is called these days, ‘EventScotland’ [interesting how one word is made out of two in these matters] and the Scottish Government. Who is it for? ‘...whether you’re a Scot, of Scottish descent, or simply love Scotland ....’

(<http://homecomingscotland2009.com/>) – the last giving the touristic game away somewhat. It doesn’t matter if you don’t have any Scottish blood; just come here – please.

One might gently mock these endeavours, but they have a serious import, namely, to grow visitor numbers; and the marker is Ireland. No-one is deemed to have done it better. It is a moot point as to whether what is on sale here is authentic national culture – it depends, after all, what one means by ‘authentic’. Back in 1995, I published a book called **Scotland – the Brand** in which I used MacCannell’s concept of ‘staged authenticity’:

'The touristic way of getting in with the natives is to enter into a quest for authentic experiences, perceptions and insights. The quest is marked off in stages in the passage from front to back. Movement from stage to stage corresponds to growing touristic understanding. This continuum is sufficiently developed in some areas of the world that it appears as an infinite regression of stage sets. Once in this manifold, the tourist is trapped; his road does not end abruptly in some conversion process... as he breaks the bounds of all that is pseudo and penetrates, finally, into a real back region. Tourists make brave sorties out from their hotels hoping, perhaps, for an authentic experience, but their paths can be traced in advance over the small increments of what is for them increasingly apparent authenticity proffered by tourist settings.

Adventuresome tourists progress from stage to stage, always in the public eye, and greeted everywhere by their obliging hosts. (1974:602)

The point, of course, is to treat the authentic as a construction, mainly but not exclusively, for touristic purposes. The natives do not escape either. They too are drawn in to be extras, and like actors, play the best parts the more they enter into the spirit, such that it becomes difficult to distinguish the real from the performative. Thus, 'ordinary' Scots are drawn in to celebrate Hogmanay much as tourist are. No longer is it a matter of dark men going round the neighbours first-fitting, clutching a lump of coal and a piece of black bun. We are willingly coopted into our parts as 'real Scots'. We are ineluctably drawn in to play the roles allotted us, confirming, as it seems to, what it means to celebrate our national identity. It is just as impossible and foolhardy to pretend we can celebrate the 'real' from 'authentic' aspect of our culture as it is for Trobriand Islanders, who, quite possibly, are better at game-playing than we are.

## Conclusion

What, then, does the sociologist have to offer this analysis of culture and heritage?

The first point to make is that the economist's reading gets us only half-way down the road. To be sure, the issue here is marketing what passes for the past, heritage, but that doesn't explain why it, or some of it, has cultural power. Heritage cannot simply be equated with 'the past' because it is a selected, a constructed, even a manufactured version. The rise of the heritage industry, which our book attempted to analyse back in the mid-1990s as regards Scotland, 'Heritage' is a rather pale version of the French term '*patrimoine*', closely allied to rural imagery and peasant culture, as well as according to the *Code Civil*, 'inheritance', legally defined. Pierre Nora, whose massive study *Lieux de Mémoire*, Realms of Memory, has added so much to our understanding of French national culture, pointed out that in the late 1970s/early 1980s, there took place a shift in the meaning of '*patrimoine*' from the narrow legal sense to refer to French national and artistic treasures (1998: 704, note 26).

The focus is not on the inert past but the active present. Heritage is not simply read off what is 'there'; in other words, it is not 'history', archaic relics, but a reinvention or re-membering of what is active and meaningful in the here and now. Places of heritage – Newgrange, Edinburgh Castle and the like – become centres of spectacle and display, not simply for economic reasons ('come and see what we are like, pay the entrance fee') so much as being allowed into a cultural world which signifies (in that semiotic sense) who We are in national identity terms; being let in, as it were, to a secret. Heritage, as such, does not carry within it a single, oppressive social message. For example, in a Scottish context, the appropriation of tartanry by the Victorian

monarchy and its associations with the landed elite in Scotland, does not rule out a radical interpretation of a more populist kind. At the end of **Scotland – the Brand**, I wrote: ‘Taken to extremes, the view that what matters is authenticity as performance can quickly be reduced to a kind of double reflexivity – tourists watch a ‘native’ performance which is put on for them by knowing actors, and what’s more the tourists know that. In sum, what is on offer is playful behaviour, and no harm seems to be done.’ (McCrone et al., 1995: 209). However, as Bruner pointed out a couple of years earlier, this might require inversion, namely, that the tourist self is changed very little by the experience, whereas the native self is transformed in the process of re-presentation. Perhaps in the marketing of heritage and culture, Scotland (and Ireland) are experienced as lands ‘out of time’, as ‘enchanted fortress(es) in a disenchanted world’ (Rojek, 1993: 181). Selling culture and heritage may require alienating them, and we all end up believing in our own stereotypes whether we like it or not.

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